

Tiberghien, G. (2019) Managing the planning and development of authentic eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan. *Tourism Planning and Development*, 16(5), pp. 494-513. (doi:[10.1080/21568316.2018.1501733](https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2018.1501733)).

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Deposited on: 20 July 2018

Managing the planning and development of authentic eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan

Abstract:

With the increasing visitors' attention to the authenticity of heritage and tourism practices when they visit off the beaten track destinations, the question of authenticity in the experience of place becomes significant for the stakeholders involved in the management and development of tourism. This study investigates the managerial practices associated with the planning and development of authentic eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan. A qualitative case study research approach based on semi-structured interviews with policymakers, tourism developers and community members from two eco-tours in South and Central Kazakhstan is adopted to examine stakeholders' authentication positions on various topic areas and eco-cultural tourism practices. Four key managerial and planning implications related to stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism are identified: empowering local communities for tourism development, redefining the host-guest tourism experience, certifying and labelling eco-cultural heritage sites and including authenticity as a unique and important feature in future tourism products and experiences.

Keywords: Authenticity, Community Empowerment, Tourism Experience, Eco-certification, Eco-cultural Tourism, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

With the blend of unique landscapes and cultural heritage associated with the Silk Road, Central Asian states have long fascinated travellers. Albeit being a fairly unknown tourism destination either globally or within Central Asia, Kazakhstan encompasses numerous tourism attractions based on its nomadic culture and a variety of cultural landscapes (Sarmiento & Serikboluly, 2014). The Kazakhstani tourism industry underwent major structural changes since Soviet times (1922–1991) when the economy was centrally planned and tourism facilities were maintained and controlled by the state (D. R. Hall, 1991) to the independence of the country in 1991 when the figure of the Nomad was restored by the contemporary collective imagery to become an important

theme used for the country's image (Laruelle, 2008). With the increasing commodification of cultural heritage and the demand of ecotourism in Kazakhstan (Schreiber, 2008; Werner, 2003), visitors can discover the country with tourism operators working with home-stay providers who have ancestral links to the villages. The revival of livestock breeding enabling travellers who visit Kazakhstan to experience the lifestyles of semi-nomadic livestock breeders (Schreiber, 2008; Tiberghien, 2014), and the demand for authentic cultural heritage experiences is increasingly leading to a number of new nature and cultural tourism products providing local communities' perspectives as eco-cultural tourism experiences (Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Ashirbekova, 2013; Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Milne, 2015).

Despite the number of studies researching the question of authenticity in cultural-heritage tourism in Asia (Suntikul, Butler, & Airey, 2010; Xie, 2011; Xie & Wall, 2002; Yang & Wall, 2009), there is no common agreement about how to interpret the various meanings of authenticity given by stakeholders involved in the development and planning of 'off the beaten track' Central Asian destinations. Whereas the tourism industry tends to provide its own definitions of the traditional or typical, it is therefore important to gain an understanding of how Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism destinations are managed, planned and developed by the private and public sectors. The study first explores the question of authenticity in Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism development. In particular, the research examines the role authenticity plays in the management of local community participation and empowerment, the Kazakhstani tourism experience and the certification and labelling of eco-cultural heritage sites. Next, case study areas, the methodology and the results of the empirical analysis of stakeholders' authentication positions on eco-cultural tourism practices are presented. It is then followed by a discussion about the managerial and planning implications related to stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism.

Authenticity and eco-cultural tourism development

The question of authenticity is central to much literature on cultural heritage and tourism development (Cohen, 1988; Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Jamal & Hill, 2004; N. Wang, 1999; Xie, 2011). Numerous tourism case studies debate a key question in the commodification of cultures: What can be adequately presented to visitors so that they have the perception of an authentic tourism experience? MacCannell's (1973) theoretical development of

staged authenticity, built upon Goffman's (1959) idea, discusses how local communities' daily activities can be performed specifically for visitors. Xie and Lane (2006) observe that the power to authenticate tourism sites and experiences lies not only in the 'front stage' and 'backstage' dichotomy, but in a negotiated power between all agents involved in cultural-heritage development. These agencies include the government, ethnic communities, tourism businesses and the tourists, and the process results in a cycle of authenticity of tourism sites where cultural meaning is negotiated by a variety of parties. As Prideaux and Timothy (2008) argue, the point of time when a culture is frozen and commodified for tourism purposes is an important question that is decided both by the main stakeholders and the level of demand by tourists for specific tourism experiences. The development and planning of tourism can induce cultural changes that give birth to new forms of cultural expression, exemplified in Kazakhstan as a 'neo-nomadic tourism culture' (Tiberghien, 2016; Tiberghien & Xie, 2016) that have to be accepted both by the tourist and that also fits into newly globalised form of culture that the local community has adopted.

Kolar and Zabkar (2010, p. 653) suggest that from a managerial point of view, tourism managers should devote more attention to "subtle and deeply ingrained societal changes that exist outside the tourism market yet which essentially shape tourist behaviour and experiences." Managing and planning an 'authentic tourism encounter' requires various actors involved in the delivery of the tourism experience and a model of tourism development that can fit all stakeholders involved in the process. For Wang (1999, p. 350), "authenticity is relevant to some kinds of tourism such as ethnic, history or culture tourism, which involve the representation of the Other or of the past." While cultural tourism usually involves exposure to a culture in an indirect way, ethnic tourism is defined as a component of cultural tourism involving a direct experience with another culture (Wood, 1984). Community-based tourism (CBT) centres more particularly on the involvement of the host community in planning and maintaining tourism development in order to create a more sustainable industry (C. M. Hall, 1996). Eco-cultural tourism combines ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape to create experiences for tourists (Wallace & Russell, 2004) and involve a distribution of gain and ownership models that allows local communities' empowerment (Wallace, 2002).

By using various aspects of authenticity (objective, constructive and personal) in cultural-heritage tourism, Jamal and Hill's (2004) defined a framework for indicators of

authenticity that aims to assist managers to develop effective indicators for monitoring and managing cultural objects, sites and destinations. The objective approach highlights that the visitor's authentic experience depends upon the tourist recognising the authenticity of the visited objects or experience (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; N. Wang, 1999, 2000). Constructive authenticity of an experience is relative and negotiable (Cohen, 1988), context dependent (Salamone, 1997) and is a dynamic process that changes over time (MacLeod, 2006). From a postmodern perspective, existential authenticity can be defined as a special state of living in which an individual is true to oneself as tourists are seeking authenticity within themselves rather than in toured places or objects (N. Wang, 1999). For Kolar and Zabkar (2010) and Lau (2010), these diverging views also reflect the different epistemological and philosophical positions that have a stake in the conceptualisation of authenticity.

Authenticity and local communities' empowerment

Smith and Duffy (2003, p. 133) argue "the issue of authenticity is much more important for the host community". Prideaux and Timothy (2008) highlight that commodification is necessary and can be one mechanism via which all communities can retain at least part of their traditional culture and heritage. For Werner (2003), tourism development in Central Asia is beneficial for local cultures, as it implies a renaissance of artistic traditions in decline and the apparition of new forms of cultural manifestation. In Mongolia, constructing tourism products and experiences based on cultural landscapes allow local populations to reinforce their identity and cultural proficiency either for internal or external political reasons (Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, 2008). The benefits of local community participation for achieving long term tourism sustainability thus necessitates cooperation and involvement from all stakeholders implied in the process of local tourism planning and development (Aas, Ladkin, & Fletcher, 2005; Byrd, 2007; H. Wang, Yang, Chen, Yang, & Li, 2010).

An important question raised in the management and planning of authenticity and cultural heritage relates to how to portray some aspects of the local traditions that incorporate the local communities' views. Cultural and heritage tourism places have been described as destinations with a story, with cultural tourism described as a process of telling that story (Cass & Jahrig, 1998). Weaving a story around tangible and intangible cultural and historical assets can alert visitors to what to do while on sites and provide

meaningful activities around how visitors should interpret the given information (Cass & Jahrig, 1998; Fawcett & Cormack, 2001; Moscardo, 1998). The potential incorporation of storytelling by locals themselves into cultural tourism encounters can greatly influence the understanding of the 'sense of place'. Pfister (2000) notes for example that the "accuracy" and "authenticity" of information provided by local guides are important factors that affect visitors' learning about a place. Carr (2008, p. 36) additionally details that "the presence of interpretation, either passive (for example signage) or active (with guides) can direct visitors' attention to cultural values" and provide a heritage experience that is specific to the location in which it occurs.

Authenticity and the host-guest tourism experience

Many academics (Conran, 2006; Ryan, 1997; Tucker, 2003) have debated the impact of tourism on local communities, both socially and economically, and in particular the complex relationships between hosts and guests. For Edensor (1998, 2000), the experience of the visitor is related to performance-based touristic space that shapes individual and collective as well as place-based identities. Within the tourism encounter, these performances are dependent upon the regulation of the stage and the players, upon the relationship between the players such as hosts and guests. The host-guest interaction and visitors' perception of authenticity is related to the number of other tourists that guests encounter during their visits, the degree to which guests feel crowded during their visits, and the conditions (use levels) that guests feel are acceptable (Manning, 2001; McIntyre & Boag, 1995; Needham, Rollins, & Wood, 2004).

Within the tourism encounter, the host-guest relationship is complex and context dependent. Some authors argue that interaction between hosts and guests gives way to many different scenarios of authenticity. Aronsson (1994, p. 86), for example, refers to 'authentic meeting places' where visitors and local populations meet in encounters that are part of the everyday life of the local populations. When examining the question of authenticity at intra-personal and inter-personal levels, N. Wang (2000) claims certain tourism encounters favour the meeting of visitors and local populations in a way that is not related to the 'front stage'/'backstage' dichotomy. From his research on home-stay guest houses at Lijiang, a World Cultural-heritage site in China, Y. Wang (2007) argues that as tourists subconsciously search for 'home' in their travels, the production of customised authenticity can be created in tourism contacts with the local populations.

How local communities manage to engage in creative exchanges with visitors and understand tourists' expectations is key to a successful and authentically perceived tourism experience. In the Kazakhstani context, Tiberghien, Bremner and Milne (2017) argue that the performative aspects contributing to augmenting the perceived authenticity of the visitors' eco-cultural experiences are spontaneous, existential and reciprocal relationships with their hosts in intimate tourism encounters. By wishing to witness local craft-making in the villages, visitors are aiming for an authentic tourism experience produced in performative spaces like the guest houses. The performative aspects of the host–guest relationship favour the exchange of knowledge and, even more importantly, the sharing of feelings, or what Cohen and Cohen (2012) refer to as 'hot' authentication.

Authentication and eco-certification of heritage sites

From a governance perspective, the key questions that deserve attention in this study are related to who controls the power to authenticate tourism sites and the levels of authenticity various stakeholders will strive to achieve in the construction of eco-cultural tourism sites. Xie (2011) and Ateljevic and Doorne (2005) state that the power to authenticate ethnic cultures in China is characterised by tensions between various stakeholders involved in the development of ethnic tourism. In most non-Western countries, authenticating or certifying the craft and art products of minority peoples is an integral part of the commodification of cultures, a certification of authenticity (such as granting eco-labels) which is issued by authorised institutions and 'received' by tourists (Chhabra, 2005). Building on Selwyn's (1996) essential work about 'hot' and 'cool' authenticity, Cohen and Cohen (2012, p. 1298) defines 'cool' authentication as "typically a single, explicit, often formal or even official, performative (speech) act, by which the authenticity of an object, site, event, custom, role or person is declared to be original, genuine or real, rather than a copy, fake or spurious". Cohen and Cohen further argue that in contemporary society 'cool' authentication can be associated with certification procedures when some certain predetermined standards or qualifications are met, also known in a wider sense as accreditation. On a global scale, some certifications are given by international organisations, such as UNESCO which aims at granting authentication to cultural heritage artefacts through its list of "World Heritage sites" (Buckley, 2004; Lorenzini, Calzati, & Giudici, 2011). For local communities involved in ecotourism, certification is seen as a way to promote their cultural heritage effectively while ensuring

a level of environmental performance in the production of internationally tradable tourism products (Buckley, 1992, 2002).

Case study areas

Tourism knowledge gathering has been generally characterised by case studies, area-specific discussions, examples of best practices, and one-off or one-time research (C. M. Hall, Williams, & Lew, 2004). Case studies provided the major source of empirical evidence for the analysis of the managerial practices associated with the development of authentic eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan. The Kyzylarai tour in Central Kazakhstan and the Tulip tour in South Kazakhstan (Figure 1) were used as sources of empirical evidence for the study following the first international ecotourism conference held in Karaganda city where the researcher met with various stakeholders (policymakers, tourism developers) involved in eco-cultural tourism in the country. Figure 1 shows the location of the two villages where the tourists stayed and undertook eco-cultural activities during their visits: Shabanbai Bi for the Kyzylarai tour and Kanshengel for the Tulip tour, respectively. Both tours included various aspects of the remains of the nomadic culture heritage and archaeological sites from the Bronze Age. The two case studies offered contrasting situations (research setting, structure and organisation of the tours, activities proposed to visitors) compared with those of a single case alone (Eilbert & Lafronza, 2005; Hanna, 2005).

Figure 1

The Kyzylarai tour was developed by the members of the Ecological Tourism and Public Awareness in Central Kazakhstan (ETPACK) project and was one of the first community-based eco-tours in Central Kazakhstan promoted by national and international organisations. During the project implementation, an eco-site was managed and developed by the 'Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan' eco-tourism operator that comprised a souvenir production of traditional handicrafts and a network of home-stays in the village of Shabanbai Bi where visitors were accommodated and where they shared traditional meals and dairy products with their hosts. The three-day Kyzylarai tour combined a visit to the granite sepulchres of Begazy and rock paintings dating from the Bronze Age during the first day, an excursion to the local archaeological and ethnographical museum on the second day and a visit of the ShabanBai Bi village in the third day of the tour.

The Tulip tour was organised by a member of the national Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) who is also the author of the first comprehensive cultural guide book of Kazakhstan (Schreiber, 2008). The first day comprised a visit to the petroglyphs from the middle and late Bronze Age of the UNESCO World Heritage site of Tamgaly. After an exploration of the steppes landscapes during the second day of the tour, the visit continued to a camel farm where visitors were offered the opportunity to taste camel milk products (*shubat*, *kurt*) from the traditional nomadic culture. The tour was designed for visitors who aimed at experiencing sleeping in a yurt that was organised specifically for them. Home-stay providers offered visitors the choice of sleeping in beds or on *körpes* (traditional mattresses on the floor) in order to maintain a certain level of comfort and supplied yurts with proper sanitary conditions and toilets.

Research methods

For Jamal and Hill (2004, p. 22), the authenticity in the heritage domain is situated in a constructivist perspective particularly “with respect to the role of public and private sector actions in historic preservation, heritage (re)construction and destination management.” The research position for this study is embedded in a constructivist/interpretivist thought and practice (Hollinshead, 2006) and a constructivist paradigm was adopted as a managerially more appropriate position for disclosing the managerial and planning implications of the process of commodification of Kazakhstani cultural heritage. Purposive or judgmental sampling method was used in order to select unique informants that were especially informative about the development of eco-cultural tourism projects in Kazakhstan. Nineteen semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were conducted with various stakeholders who were directly or indirectly involved with the development of the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours including local government officials, NGO coordinators, tourism operators, home-stay providers and experts in nomadic culture.

Following Yin’s (2009) approach that the examination of word tables from cross-case patterns relies on argumentative interpretation, the interview transcripts were coded line by line to look for recurrent themes which were developed and refined with the integration of secondary interdisciplinary literature. Themes were generated through the interpretation of the empirical materials by constantly comparing the codes identified from the semi-structured interviews. Some questions used in semi-structured interviews (“What is your definition of an authentic tourism experience?”, “What kind of tourism

approach do you think is the most appropriate to develop authentic tourism experiences when travelling in Kazakhstan?”) involved elaborate answers from the interviewees. Multiple iterations of coding were used to confirm the validity of the data analysis using complementary word tables to establish cross-case patterns about various stakeholders’ perception of authenticity of eco-cultural tourism practices in Kazakhstan. Results were finally compared with empirical data in order to make the findings and conclusions plausible.

Research findings

Authenticity, eco-cultural tourism and certification

A majority of tourism providers considered the fauna and flora of the steppes landscapes were key elements in portraying an authentic image of the nomadic culture. This view was shared particularly by a majority of local home-stay providers, for whom steppes landscapes were recognised to be one of the most authentic parts of the visitors’ tourism experience. Camels in steppes landscapes (Figure 2) encountered during the Tulip tour were perceived as a sight that could contribute to visitors’ romantic views of the nomadic culture and the Silk Road. NGO coordinators confirmed that the Kazakhstani cultural landscapes often constitute the main authentic aspect of a visitor experience in the country. They highlighted that, in particular, this connection gave visitors the possibility to travel in cultural landscapes on horseback and experience, upon availability, a yurt nomadic shelter with the local population, and therefore “meet visitors’ expectations about traditional nomadic culture”.

Figure 2

A vast majority of stakeholders emphasised not only the importance of ecological (fauna and flora) but also cultural (traditional games, craft-making and cooking traditions) aspects in the design of the visitors’ experiences. Experts in Kazakhstani cultural heritage associated the ancestral nomadic culture with “strong family values” and “a sense of the community”, but also emphasised its connectedness to “fauna, flora” and “culinary traditions” that were influenced by the traditional nomadic lifestyle. One of the home-stay providers in the village of Shabanbai Bi noted:

“Our cuisine is handmade and fresh, and the preparation and recipes of traditional meals are transmitted from one generation to another, like *bes barmak* (meal made out of horse meat).”

More than half of the tourism providers indicated that eco-cultural tourism, among other models of tourism development such as ethnic tourism and community-based tourism, was the most appropriate model for tourism development in the rural areas. Eco-cultural tourism ideally combined visits to archaeological sites from the Bronze Age with remains of the post-Soviet heritage, and contributed to the preservation of rural villages by empowering local populations with eco-tourism practices. Two experts in nomadic culture and a majority of NGO coordinators acknowledged in particular that “following a nomadic way of life could be a suitable way for visitors to have an authentic tourism experience in the country” on the condition visitors lived with the local communities in the villages to be able to experience their hosts’ cultural traditions. Home-stay providers further suggested a number of ways that local people could enhance visitor understanding of culture. Some of them thought members of the local communities could organise traditional games’ performances so that tourists can have a deeper understanding of nomadic lifestyle, as one of the home-stay providers stated:

“It would be good to show tourists traditional games and cultural performances inspired by the nomadic culture in the villages as the summer season is more appropriate for tourists to ‘experience’ cultural landscapes (steppes). Their tourism experience is therefore more oriented towards nature, mountains and forests rather than cultural events.”

While a majority of the home-stay providers emphasised the importance of nature and culture preservation, two NGO coordinators underlined the notion of authenticity as being a unique and important feature associated with eco-cultural tourism practices and tours offered in the country. Conversely, despite cultural landscapes were seen by government officials as one of the best sources of authentic tourism experiences for visitors, government officials from the Ministry of Tourism aimed at developing access and hospitality infrastructures to key cultural sites of the former traditional culture, like the site of Kyzylarai Mountains, to attract a larger number of tourists, be it at the expense of environmental and cultural sustainability around ancestral cultural heritage sites. A certification of authenticity was thus perceived as being necessary, and initiated

in the Shabanbai Bi village by KTA (Figure 3), which granted ‘eco-labels’ in rural areas. One of the home-stay operators indicated the importance of label certification in the villages:

“The Shabanbai Bi village was one of the first villages to be certified by the agency responsible for the development of eco-tourism in the country. The certification procedures and labelling are ensuring that most basic hygiene and safety standards are met.”

By making local home-stay providers familiar with notions of sustainability, environmental preservation and maintenance of ecological zones, KTA was aiming to ensure the self-sustainability of the eco-sites but additionally foster a higher level of perceived authenticity of eco-cultural tourism practices.

Figure 3

This professionalisation of tourism practices in Shabanbai Bi village was not perceived by most home-stay providers as diminishing the level of authenticity of tourism practices in the village; rather, the local hosts perceived the certification as “official proof of their ability to deliver quality authentic tourism experiences for visitors”.

Authenticity, intimacy and nomadic sense of hospitality

According to more than three-quarters of the NGO coordinators, the structure of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan was conducive to creating opportunities for ‘backstage’ experiences and intimate encounters. The main guide of the Kyzylarai tour acknowledged the importance of intimate tourism experiences where the host community members were presenting their daily lives and the ‘nomadic sense of hospitality’ without artificially creating a contrived tourism encounter for their guests:

“Most of our visitors are asking to live and witness the traditions of local people. We are trying to share with the visitors the sense of hospitality that was and is still prevailing in the nomadic culture so that their tourism experience becomes as close as possible to the daily life of the local populations.”

In particular, the division between the ‘front’ and ‘back’ region defined by Goffman (1959) was not prevalent in the village of Shabanbai Bi. NGO coordinators and the tourism operators of the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours were encouraging a direct contact with visitors so the local communities continue their traditions in front of them. A majority of home-stay providers emphasised that the visitors’ stay in the guest houses where they shared a ‘nomadic lifestyle’ and interact with the local population, enhanced the authenticity of their tourism experiences. Some NGO coordinators recognised the importance of creating a host–guest relationship through a stronger commitment by the visitors to experience some aspects of the lives of the home-stay providers. As this NGO coordinator explained, being able to experience something authentic in Kazakhstan implied “helping people at work as the traditional nomadic lifestyle is also about a hard way of life”. This perception was reinforced by two specialists in nomadic culture in Kazakhstan who highlighted:

“What was objectively authentic was the hard way of life of people living in the steppes, far from the idyllic vision of the past or romantic views of the visitors.”

Therefore, the ontological aspects of developing a relationship between hosts and guests in the villages presupposed an enduring process of visitors’ commitment and a shared ‘slice of life’ with the local populations and the ‘backstage’ of their lives. As one of the specialists in nomadic cultures revealed:

“Daily lives of local people in the villages are pretty much about breeding their cattle to survive, but the visitors’ initiation to this type of lifestyle is quite authentic. Human interactions make the experience authentic. In the end, it’s all about the nature of the interactions between hosts and guests and the degree of satisfaction of the visitor’s tourism experiences.”

In the case of Shabanbai Bi village, cross-cultural understandings between tourists and home-stay providers were favoured during evening meals at the guest houses in a form a “family feeling”, where the level of intimacy between visitors and the host community members was high, a degree of intimacy required if visitors were to fully appreciate the complexities of the Kazakhstani eco-cultural heritage.

All local tourism providers said that culinary traditions remained “intact” in rural areas and the traditional table filled with dishes (*dastarkhan*) was perceived as objectively

authentic. Thus, the impression of a genuine tourism experience was given by home-stay providers through culinary aspects of their cultural heritage, in particular when the visitors were given the possibility to *participate* in the preparation of the meals and had the recipes and experiences explained by the tourism operator or guides of the tours. The opportunity to be part of the cooking experience was provided spontaneously by home-stay providers as part of their daily lives in the villages, and the ‘backstage’ of their lives when they showed and explained in detail to German visitors the processes of making *kymiz* (traditional horse milk). By engaging visitors in participatory activities (for example, cooking and craft-making activities), local operators aimed to change the nature of the exchange between hosts and guests. As one of the operator explained:

“Tourists are participating in the activities, witnessing how people live, how people prepare food, or watch the process of weaving a carpet. We do have a know-how that we can share with visitors.”

As tourists involved in active participation rather than observation are more likely to experience a sense of existential authenticity (Kim & Jamal, 2007; N. Wang, 1999), the intimate experience of sharing local culinary knowledge in villages or in yurts was perceived as an ‘authentic encounter’ by home-stay providers, who explained that they did not need to stage the cooking of the meals specifically for visitors.

Authenticity, crowding and the host-guest relationship

When asked about what would constitute an authentic tourism experience for a visitor in their villages, a majority of the home-stay providers mention the home environment, using expressions such as “be with my family” and “be in my house” to depict an authentic tourism encounter. The main local home-stay operator and guide for the Kyzylarai tour acknowledged the importance of reciprocal relationships between host community members and their guests. This idea entailed that the host community members are as equally interested in the visitors’ stories as the visitors are about their hosts’. This position was shared by a majority of the home-stay providers, who noted the necessity to share their culture with their guests. One home-stay provider described the importance of having a reciprocal relationship with her guests “as a mean to ask them about their own culture”. The home-stay providers seemed particularly keen to organise

a tourism experience for international visitors that focuses on the *processes* of preparing local meals and traditional craft-making (*kilims* and *körpes*, Figure 4).

Figure 4

In this way, principles of reciprocity between hosts and guests occurred in a ‘natural’ context, with the home-stay tourism encounters facilitating such exchanges. NGO coordinators emphasised the need to ‘un-stage’ the local population’s lives as a way of augmenting visitors’ perception of authenticity while on sites:

“Visitors should be invited to witness how local people are practising their traditions for themselves, and not the other way around.”

As with volunteer tourism (Conran, 2011), NGO coordinators placed a high priority on the quality of the interactions between tourists and the host communities, recognising that these interactions must move beyond superficiality.

A majority of home-stay providers also noted that principles of reciprocity between hosts and guests would be enhanced by minimising the number of visitors at any one time. The reciprocal relationship between hosts and guests was transformed as the number of visitors increased because home-stay providers became less interested and caring about the guests they are welcoming into their homes. For some NGO coordinators, having a small number of visitors was a necessary condition to ensure the communication between hosts and guests is functioning well. These NGO coordinators, as well as the organiser of the Kyzylarai tour, also supported the idea of ‘rotating’ the families who host a limited number of visitors in order to “keep a high level of authenticity”. Interestingly, the main organiser of the Tulip tour also noted that limiting the number of visitors could help to establish a better linkage between visitors, the guide of the tour and the host populations by allowing the guide to respond more appropriately to visitors’ questions:

“My visitors usually come for two weeks, and I have a programme for each day which is quite flexible. Before they come I usually explore different options. We have very small groups, between six to twelve visitors maximum at the same time, which allows me to be responsive for each visitor’s demand and give an appropriate response adequately.”

One of the specialists in nomadic culture highlighted the importance of “maintaining a certain degree of equality” by favouring reciprocal encounters between hosts and guests, an approach contributing to minimising cultural misunderstandings with local populations. The reciprocal mode of exchange between hosts and guests in the Kazakhstani villages of Shabanbai Bi and Kanshengel was managed and planned differently by local communities in the ways they responded and interacted with tourists so that both hosts and guests had valuable tourism experiences. In the Tulip tour, creative reciprocity was not favoured by the organiser, with the roles of the home-stay providers being limited to providing food and accommodation for visitors. In Shabanbai Bi village, the hosts who engaged in a deeper relationship with their guests (by explaining various meanings of the traditional nomadic culture to them) pointed out that both parties grew in their cultural knowledge from the exchange. For both tours, it implied that the tour operators had to make decisions about how many visitors could actually benefit from an experience in the guest houses with the local populations while still keeping a high level of reciprocity between hosts and guests.

Managerial implications and discussion

Of particular relevance to this study is the question of how tourism providers can shape the reality for tourists and provide a depiction of the true social and economic situation in the destination. In Kazakhstan, financial sustainability and the participation of different stakeholders are crucial for the long-term future of eco-cultural tourism. This study reaffirms the question of how various Kazakhstani tourism suppliers’ tourism practices, necessary to support the development and planning of eco-cultural tourism in the villages, need to be balanced in regards to questions of authenticity.

Local communities’ empowerment for tourism development

The Tulip and Kyzylarai tours offered different levels of commodification of cultural heritage and, more importantly, different tourism products – offerings that reflect the organisers’ different views on eco-cultural tourism development. While home-stay providers on the Kyzylarai tour were given more freedom and empowerment by the tour organisers to interact with tourists in Shabanbai Bi village, the tourism experience in Kanshengel village was more controlled by the Tulip tour organiser who offered a commodified version of the nomadic culture that limited contacts and discussions

between hosts and guests. Operators from both the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours saw the cultural landscapes not only as a source of authentic tourism experiences, but also as an element of the eco-cultural tourism encounter that remained unchanged and objectively authentic. By reaffirming their ancestral links to the landscapes, home-stay providers could similarly construct and offer tourism experiences that emphasise the steppes and mountains as authentic tourism encounters. Allowing local communities to present their own culture themselves (as tour guides) without intermediaries being involved could lead not only to a more balanced portrayal and appreciation of minority culture tourism but also enhance the quality of tourism experiences (Xie, 2011). Additionally, by looking at the opportunity to commodify traditional games in the villages, home-stay providers were hoping to create new tourism products for local and international visitors that incorporate authentic cultural and historical components of the traditional nomadic lifestyle, such as traditional horse games held in the Shabanbai Bi village (*Kokpar*, Figure 5).

Figure 5

Home-stay providers should be given the opportunity to re-enact some traditional aspects of their cultural heritage to specifically satisfy visitors' perceptions of 'authentic' nomadic culture as a means of potentially enhancing visitors' perceptions of authenticity.

Redefining the host-guest tourism experience

An important theme emerging from this study is the need for the local communities to reinforce their cultural proficiency as a way to strengthen the host–guest relationship. Visitors from both tours expressed their interest in knowing more about traditional nomadic culture. By sharing knowledge about traditional nomadic ways of life and by involving visitors in participatory activities, local home-stay providers can generate creative reciprocity with their guests who, in turn, become more open to share their views and talk about themselves. In return, this increases the likelihood of return visits and developing higher levels of understanding between hosts and guests.

An important implication emerging from this study relates to the need for better linkages between the hosts who run the guest houses in the villages and their guests and how crowding influences perception of authenticity. As the development of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan is at its early stage, the creation of this relationship between hosts and guests requires tourism intermediaries who can control the number of tourists to these

culturally and environmentally sensitive eco-sites. Limiting numbers has the added benefit of favouring a positive host–guest relationship. The study findings reveal that a high level of interactions can occur between hosts and guests when there is only a small number of visitors staying in the guest houses. The exclusivity and authenticity of the tourism experience on both tours is possible because the number of tourists on each tour is restricted. Crowding thus influence the visitors’ perception of the authenticity of their tourism experiences in the villages. The study findings reveal that a high level of interactions can occur between hosts and guests when there is only a small number of visitors staying in the guest houses. By limiting the crowding (Manning, 2001; McIntyre & Boag, 1995; Needham et al., 2004) of tourists in the guest houses, tourism organisers could improve the number and quality of interactions between visitors and home-stay providers. Consequently, the quest for authenticity sought by tourists coming to Kazakhstan, and more specifically, access to the ‘backstage’ where local populations are maintaining a semi-nomadic lifestyle, remains possible with a small number of visitors who are culturally aware of some aspects of the traditional nomadic culture.

Another important managerial implication of this study is related to the potential incorporation of storytelling by locals themselves into cultural tourism encounters to influence visitors’ understanding of the ‘sense of place’. Tourism organisers can help to improve visitors’ perception of existential authenticity in the rural villages of Shabanbai Bi and Kanshengel by encouraging the home-stay providers on the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours to tell stories about their local communities, especially stories that explain former nomadic traditions and lifestyles. Moreover, such storytelling will help the communities to keep the stories alive for their younger generations. By providing more information about the sense of place *while* tourists are visiting the cultural landscapes on the Kyzylarai and Tulip tours, tour organisers participate in increasing visitors’ understanding of cultural heritage in the villages. More culturally aware visitors can exchange information more easily with their hosts, who can, in return, reciprocate with stories about themselves and their cultural heritage.

Certifying and labelling eco-cultural heritage sites

One of the important findings of this study is related to the need for a joint cooperation between government officials, local NGOs and tour operators in the certification and tourism planning of various Kazakhstani historical and cultural sites to allow further

development of eco-cultural tourism in other Kazakhstani rural areas. By helping to identify which guest houses can meet visitors' expectations and what kind of tourism experiences can be offered in rural areas, NGOs play an important role in supporting alternative tourism projects that involve a high level of reciprocity with local communities. By helping to foster the network of home-stays in rural villages and identify the souvenir production of traditional handicrafts, local NGOs participate in the authentication and design of eco-cultural tours that can meet visitors' expectations of authenticity when travelling in the country. A certification of authenticity, which is issued by authorised institutions and received by tourists is undertaken in the Shabanbai Bi village by local governmental agencies, which grants 'eco-labels' in rural areas. By making local home-stay providers familiar with notions of sustainability, environmental preservation and maintenance of ecological zones, local governmental agencies are aiming to ensure the self-sustainability of the eco-sites. By rewarding home-stay providers for best eco-tourism practices, the main operator of the Kyzylarai tour and KTA are jointly aiming to foster principles of tourism sustainability – principles that are looked for by international visitors. The 'cool' authentication positions given by Kazakhstani governmental agencies are encouraging a sustainable tourism based on recognisable good practices and minimum standards of comfort, safety and hygiene for tourists.

Authenticity as a unique feature in future tourism products and experiences

This study makes a practical contribution to literature associated with the incorporation of the notion of authenticity as a unique and important feature in future Kazakhstani tourism products and experiences. Authenticity contributes to the production of unique tourism experiences that are sought after by Western tourists and are not easily interchangeable with other tourism products and places. The revival of traditional nomadic culture for the sake of tourism development in the country is seen by the Kazakhstani Government and local communities as a way to adapt and transform some elements of their cultural heritage for their economic benefit. Whereas KTA, together with local tourism operators, is involved in the eco-labelling of guest houses in rural areas, there is a need for a bigger involvement of home-stay providers that allows them to also authenticate tourism products and experiences.

The model of eco-cultural tourism development offered in the Kyzylarai tour encompasses all the elements necessary to satisfy visitors' demand for an authentic

tourism experiences based on genuine reciprocal relationships with their hosts. Tourism experiences offered in Kazakhstani rural villages emphasising ancient traditional nomadic traditions and ‘natural’ tourism encounters have a greater potential to attract visitors for whom authenticity is a selective criterion when choosing a tourism destination. Cohen and Cohen (2012) argue ‘hot’ authentication is a more diffuse process which can contribute to reinforce the authenticity of existing sites, contribute to their buoyancy and increase their attractiveness to tourists. The eco-cultural tourism experience offered by home-stay providers in rural villages allows visitors to emotionally share during their visits ‘the feeling of being a nomad’. The staging of nomadic traditions, as advocated by government officials, can serve a local tourism industry that could satisfy a wider audience of visitors who are less interested in the authenticity of their tourism experiences. On a broader level, further research should consider ways of fostering better cooperation between various tourism stakeholders involved in the authentication and tourism planning of cultural heritage sites. A joint cooperation between government officials, local NGOs and tour operators in the certification and tourism planning of various Kazakhstani historical and cultural sites would allow further development of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstani rural areas and could be a way to differentiate Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices from relatively similar tourism destinations.

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